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The Lincoln Digest

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COLLECTING LINCOLN PENNIES

Abraham Lincoln was the first famous American to have his portrait appear on a coin of the United States. In 1909, during the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, the Lincoln one cent piece was put in circulation. Each successive year since then the mints of the country have struck off an ample supply of bright shining Lincoln pennies.

The bronze penny, much the same in size and metal content as the one we use now, first came from the mint in 1864 while Abraham Lincoln was President. On one side of the penny was the head of an Indian, symbol of primitive American life. Often it served as young America's first glimpse of the peculiar features of the savage of the wilderness.

As we become further removed from the days of the red man, we pay more attention to those of our own race who have advocated principles and stood for ideals upon which our civilization has been built. It is appropriate indeed that the head of Abraham Lincoln should now appear on the penny, as he has often been called "The First American" and in him we see the personification of our republic.

The head of Lincoln was not placed on the penny without much opposition, because sentiment had been de-

cidedly against the use of portraits of public men on the coins of the land. One editorial writer commented, "No President, with the possible exception of Washington, occupies any such relation to the American people as justifies his being memorialized on their coins."

Largely through the leadership of Theodore Roosevelt, who was then President, the necessary legislation was enacted to authorize the new coin, and a Lincoln bust submitted by the sculptor, Victor D. Brenner, was selected as the model for the design. The profile had been made by Brenner in 1907 and was used on a Lincoln centennial medal in 1909 when it was brought to the attention of President Roosevelt. An heroic copy of the original medallion measuring three feet in diameter may be observed in the Philadelphia City Hall.

When the penny was finally distributed there were many adverse comments, but inasmuch as it was thought the coin would only be used as a memorial penny during the year 1909, some of the objections were withdrawn. One editor looked upon the coin as an omen of ill fortune to the American Democracy, as he observed that "This new Lincoln cent may be said to mark the first visible and outward emblem of the transition from a republic into an empire."

The new penny was issued on August 2, 1909, by the Philadelphia mint and the face or obverse side appeared as follows:

Obverse side—Clothed, bearded bust of Lincoln facing right. Inscription above bust, "IN GOD WE TRUST"; to left of bust, "LIBERTY"; to right of bust, the date, beneath which appears the mint mark if any.

The inscription, "In God We Trust," which until 1909 had not been used on the one cent piece, was appropriately inscribed on the Lincoln penny. A law had been passed by

Congress on March 3, 1865, authorizing the use of the motto on American money. This was a month and a half before Lincoln's assassination.

It was the inscription on the reverse side of the penny which drew most attention, however, after the Lincoln portrait had been reluctantly accepted by some:

Reverse side—Two sprays of wheat in a conventional form enclosing inscription in five lines "E PLURIBUS UNUM ONE CENT UNITED STATES OF AMERICA." Between the two sprays of wheat on the inside of the rim the initials V. D. B.

When Victor D. Brenner placed his initials on the coin he did not anticipate the outburst of disapproval over having the design thus mutilated, and pressure was immediately brought to bear upon the director of the mint to have the initials removed. The objection to the inscription was sustained, shipments of pennies were stopped, and new dies prepared to conform to the new order.

The controversy over the sculptor's initials, following closely the heated argument over the use of the portrait of an historic character, gave the new penny tremendous publicity. The coin dealers all rejoiced and filled their vaults with the V. D. B. one cent pieces. Venders appeared on the streets selling the initialed pennies at three for five cents. The daily press reported that at one time the sub-treasury in Wall Street was so congested with people attempting to secure the pennies in exchange for currency that twenty policemen were summoned to maintain order.

Hundreds of coin collections were started with the acquisition of a V. D. B. penny. Yet today, many are not

aware that the sculptor's initials were again placed on the Lincoln penny in 1918. No considerable stir was created at the time although the new initials are on the obverse instead of the reverse side of the penny. The V. D. B. inscription is microscopic but plainly visible with a magnifying glass on the extreme lower part of the bust itself, under the shoulder and near the rim of the penny.

The Lincoln penny continued to be coined each year with no change in the design or metal content, until 1943. At this time, to preserve copper, the alloy was changed to a steel and zinc composition. The new pennies were struck of at all three of the United States' mints, but in January 1944 the coinage of copper pennies was resumed and the old copper-zinc ratio of 95-5 was restored. The steel pennies will be with us for some time however as there were about a billion of them put in circulation.

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